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An Assessment of Language Arts Curriculum and Instruction in Some Schools in Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This work, using the Descriptive Survey Design, carried out an assessment of the language arts curriculum and instruction techniques in some schools within Calabar. The population of the study involved all public secondary schools in Calabar, as well as all teachers of English Language, while the sample was made up of three public secondary schools and three English teachers at the Senior Secondary 2 (SS2) level. The instrument used was the Classroom Observation Instrument for Grammar Lessons. Findings revealed that the Certificate English for Senior Secondary Schools Book 2, prescribed for use in all public secondary schools, covers the four basic skills of English and also that teachers use more of the Modified Lecture Method, during grammar lessons, without recourse to instructional materials. Some recommendations were made, based on the findings.

Keywords: teaching methods, curriculum, content area, descriptive survey.

Introduction

The importance of a workable curriculum in any educational enterprise has long been stressed by curriculum theorists. This is because they believe that it is the curriculum that determines what happens in any educational enterprise, how it happens, with what it happens and how to be sure that it has happened (Kolawole, 2002). This explains why no meaningful progress can be made in education if the curriculum being used is inadequate or inappropriate. In putting a curriculum together, one needs to consider the propositions of various curriculum theorists who have advocated different models. These models according to Ivowi (1993) differ not only in their belief in aims/objectives, content and process of interpretation in curriculum design but also in their definitions. According to them, any curriculum worth its salt must clearly indicate the context of education, aims and objectives to be achieved, how to select and organize learning experiences or activities. Tyler (1949), Kerr (1969), Doll (1982), Stenhouse (1977), as well as Dick and Carey (1978), all cited in Kolawale (2002), have explained the relationship existing among the elements in order to make it possible for meaningful education to be achievable. Ivowi (1993), states that basically, the different parts of curriculum development that are called into play in the relationship are the curriculum elements of objectives, content, method and evaluation. He classified curriculum development models into three, namely: objectives, process and interaction models, adding that while the objectives and interaction models form the two extremes of a continuum, the process model is somewhere in-between them. He also states that the theoretical framework of curriculum development is based on the desire to provide answers to the questions “why?”, “what?” and “how?” of education. The first, the author emphasizes, seeks to provide a precise statement of objectives, the second selects and organizes learning experiences as well as plans and builds teaching/learning units, while the third considers teaching techniques, methods and approaches. It is therefore, the argument of Kerr (1969), Hirst (1974) and others, according to Ivowi (1993) that we should not decide on ‘what’ to teach or ‘how’ to teach until we have known ‘why’ we are doing so.

The English Language got to Nigeria as early as the fifteenth century through Portuguese traders and later the Missionaries and Colonial Masters. It found its way into education gradually through the Education Code of 1882 which recommended the payment of grants-in-aid to schools where English was taught (Kolawole, 2002). Today, it has become an all-important language in Nigeria since it has been domesticated. In Nigeria today, and for all it matters, English Language is the language of science and technology, national and international communication

(Adetugbo, 1980), to mention a few. Of course, it has become the language that determines the progress that students can make in their quest to acquire higher education and prestigious employment. This is because admissions into tertiary institutions are based on the acquisition of a minimum of credit pass in the language at the WAEC, WASSCE, GCE and NECO examinations. This is so because Nigeria, as a multilingual and multiethnic country has so many languages, some of which have no standard orthography that can be used to perform these functions.

Similarly, students are not promoted into higher classes if they do not do well in English Language. It is a fact that students cannot move to the Senior Secondary classes if they do not pass English at the Junior Secondary School Examinations. We also know that no student graduates from the universities without passing the compulsory (Use of English) course. In addition, the society expects students, at all levels, to be able to use English both in spoken and written forms, to communicate meaningfully and intelligently. When this is not done, it is often the case to find out what they are learning in schools these days.

In order to make sure that English is taught and learnt well, it has become a compulsory subject at all levels of education in Nigeria. This position is underscored by the fact that nursery/primary schools that ought to have used mother tongue as the language of instruction have abandoned the policy (Federal Republic of Nigeria(FRN),2004) and have resorted to the use of English Language. Kolawole (1997) reported parents' claim that they sent their children to private nursery/primary schools to have them taught English. As a language of instruction, every learner is expected to reach a level of mastery that will enable them to understand what the language is used to pass across in the process of teaching and learning. They are also expected to be able to use the same language in expressing themselves or writing answers to questions whenever the need for such arises.

In addition to being a language of instruction, English is also a compulsory subject that students must pass. This has posed a problem to most learners today because most students have found it difficult to pass the all-important subject. Several factors have been advanced for students' inability to pass but efforts are daily being made to help them overcome the problems through deeper understanding of both English as content (knowing) and as process (doing). Efforts have also been made to incorporate the process approach into the teaching of English in order to help students to learn the subject in an integrative manner.

This work therefore, assessed the language arts curriculum and instruction methods in some schools within Calabar Metropolis.

Statement of the Problem

English Language in Nigeria is a second Language (L2), which students have to learn well in order to use it to learn other school subjects, and for effective communication in the wider society (Omojuwa and Uguma, 2003). The importance of reading materials therefore, especially prescribed textbooks in the school system need not to be overemphasized. This is because textbooks are a vital instrument for teaching and learning, especially when such materials cover the entire gamut of the language arts, as well as students' ability to read them efficiently. In the first place, matching students' reading level to appropriate reading materials is a difficult task for many teachers, because of the use of ineffective methods or better put, non-use of appropriate teaching techniques. Secondly, the principle which assumes that students learn most successfully if the reading material they are given matches their reading level is easy to accept but hard to use (Bloor, 1995). The problem of this study, therefore, is stated thus: "How inclusive is the language arts curriculum, how readable are these items, as encapsulated in the prescribed textbooks and what are the instructional (teaching) strategies employed by teachers in the language arts, especially grammar classes, in Calabar Metropolis?"

Research Questions

The following research questions were formulated to guide the study:

1. What is the scope of the secondary school language arts curriculum in Calabar?
2. What teaching methods are employed by teachers during language arts lessons, especially during grammar lessons, and which method is dominant?

Purpose of the Study

The specific purpose of this study include: To ascertain;

1. the scope of the language arts curriculum in some secondary schools in Calabar; and

2. the teaching methods employed by teachers during language arts classes, especially grammar lessons, and the most dominant method.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in providing insight about the scope of the secondary school language arts curriculum in Calabar. The study is also significant in that teachers would be able to identify some of the strategies to be used in teaching the prescribed Language Textbooks. The study provides baseline data to researchers wishing to work on this topic in another locality or entirely on another subject area.

Literature Review

Long before the current English curriculum which was a product of the 1969 National Curriculum Conference came into being, the curriculum of English, according to Kolawole (2002) was essentially made up of three major components, namely: Grammar and Precise; Composition and Literature, which covered children, young adults, as well as real adults. This type of curriculum emphasized Literature in English and grammar as the substantive content areas (scholarly knowledge) which had to be taught to learners. It is reported by Kolawole (2002) that one major process of teaching the content was predominantly through the process of composition writing and that in addition to writing compositions, the introduction of language arts gave birth to the inclusion of the language skills of writing, reading, listening and speaking, in order to widen both the content and process of the curriculum. According to Kolawole (1999), the current English Language Curriculum in Nigeria includes all those experiences which point towards the development of the communicative skills and the language arts of listening, speaking, reading and writing.

The four language skills have been given adequate attention in the curriculum and they cover both content and process required for teaching the subject. These skills are essential if anybody hopes to achieve a mastery of the language. To facilitate easy mastery therefore, the curriculum is broad and covers topics such as grammar, reading, comprehension, dictation, vocabulary study, punctuation, oral (speech work), writing and listening. The goal of teaching English across culture is to help learners to be able to communicate effectively in the language. Being able to communicate in the language naturally is the ability to read, write, speak and understand the language when in the process of communication. This justifies the inclusion of the four language skills.

The Federal Ministry of Education designed two new sets of the English Language Curriculum: A 9-years Basic Education Curriculum (which covers the Junior Secondary Classes i.e. 1-3) and a Senior Secondary School Curriculum extracts of which covers Parts of speech: adverbs, conjunctions and prepositions, and the use of adverbs/adverbials and other terms to indicate manner.

What is clear is that the current English Language curriculum, like other subjects and previous ones, apart from selecting content to cover all the language skills, also clearly displays each Topic, Performance Objectives, Content, Class, Activities, Teachings Aids as well as Evaluation Guide. The implication of this is that a language teacher that is not creative or innovative will simply be bogged down by the suggested methods, objectives and materials to be used. When this happens, learners are left to learn whatever they are being taught by their teachers in a mechanical process. A process which will not take into consideration, the various situations and contexts where effective teaching and learning of English can take place. The major concern of experts is the need to make Nigerians learning the English Language to be exposed to every concept that they need in order to be able to use the language well. This is necessary because close to ninety percent of Nigerians use English as a second language (L2) because they already have their first language (L1). Learning English as a second language therefore, requires greater efforts on the part of teachers and learners.

Azikiwe (1998), intelligently discussed several methods and approaches of teaching language and as well explained strong and weak points of these methods. The methods include; Grammar-Translation Method, Direct or Natural Method, Audio-Lingual Method, Silent Way Method, Total Physical Response Method, Audio-Visual Method, Play Method, Oral Method and the Eclectic Way.

Azikiwe further, remarked that no method is the best for teaching and as such, none is solely prescribed for the teacher of Language. She however, concluded that the essence is to make them (teachers) have knowledge of the methods and procedures that they could select from and use in the presentation of their lessons but that the success of the teacher does not arise from the use of a particular method but from skill, insight and resourcefulness on his part.

Methodology

The Descriptive Survey Design was used in this study. The population of this study consisted the following; all public secondary schools in Calabar and their Language Teachers.

The simple random sampling technique was used in selecting three public secondary schools in Calabar and three English Language Teachers at the Senior Secondary Two (SS 2) level.

The instrument used was the Classroom Observation Schedule for English Grammar Lessons. This Instrument was designed to take an on-the-spot record of what happens in the classroom during a typical grammar lesson. Thus, the Instrument provides for the teacher's characteristics, such as the name and school, sex, age, qualification, experience, subject of specialization, as well as topic taught, the class, duration of the lesson, date and time of observation. The method adopted by the teacher in teaching grammatical items, the activities of both the teacher and students during the lesson, as well as the mode or technique adopted by the teacher are also captured in the instrument. One instrument was used for each lesson. Using the instrument, the appropriate cell was coded in, after the occurrence of the preceding behaviour at intervals of 15 seconds. Each observation lasted the duration of the lesson. Each teacher was observed twice.

Results

The results of the study are presented, after the references, on tables 1 and 2 based on the two research questions earlier posed as follows:

Research Question 1: Reveals that the scope of the language arts curriculum covers the four basic skills of language, namely, Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing.

Research Question 2: Reveals that two methods, namely, Modified Lecture Method and Grammar-Translation Method were used during the six (6) lessons observed. Modified Lecture Method gained 83.3% and is dominant, while Grammar-Translation Method gained 16.7%.

Summary of Findings:

The findings of the study reveal the following:

1. The scope of the secondary school language arts curriculum covers the four basic language skills of Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing.
2. The methods teachers use during language arts, especially grammar lessons, are the Modified Lecture Method and Grammar-Translation Method, whereas the former is dominant.

Discussion of Findings

The findings on scope of the language arts curriculum of Public Secondary Schools reveal that it covers the four basic language skills of Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. This finding agrees with Kolawole (2002) which advocates for a language arts curriculum which must cover all the four basic language skills.

Findings on Table 2 revealed that teachers make more use of the Modified Lecture Method, followed by the Grammar-Translation Method. Both methods make classroom interaction unidirectional i.e. from teacher to students, a situation that does not augur well for a result-oriented teaching/learning exercise, as attested to, by Kolawole (1997). The dominant use of the Modified Lecture Method in teaching grammatical items also accounts for the formal teaching of grammar in our secondary schools. The practice is opposed to what Obanya (1982) and Azikiwe (1998) postulated that a lot of changes now abound in teaching a second language in general and grammar, in particular. Grammar, according to them, should not be learned by rote or by the learner reciting rules but rather, the teaching/learning should be more contextually-based.

Conclusions

From the findings of this study, the following conclusions are drawn:

The scope of the Public Secondary School language arts curriculum in Calabar is all-embracing, because it covers the four basic language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing.

The Modified Lecture Method of teaching is most dominantly used by teachers of the English Language, especially during grammar lessons. The implication of this is that it does not make education learner-based but rather teacher-based. This is not a favourable trend.

Recommendations

Based on the results of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Teachers of Language should strive to adopt contextual teaching of grammar, so as to ensure effective learning, since formal teaching is out-dated, as could be attested to, by current literature.
2. Teachers of Language should ensure that their activities do not always dominate those of the students in any given lesson, because, for the teaching/learning to be meaningful and result-oriented, both the teacher and students must be in

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Presentation of Tables

S/No.	Content Area	Breakdown of Content
1	Vocabulary	Words in context of Sports, Entertainment, Insurance, Military Forces, Health, etc; Modifiers as describing words; Prefixes and spelling (the use of Dictionary).
2	Structure	More about nouns, pronouns, and nominalization; More about verbs (passive and active voice); Introduction to sequence of tenses and more about phrases; more about adjuncts; More about comprehending and use of complex structures.
3	Spoken English	Consonant clusters in Dialogues; Unstressed vowel sounds; Syllables/Stress pattern; Intonation; Speaking skills: debates, toasts and other formal speeches.
4	Comprehension (Listening and Reading)	Listening for implied meanings; reading for critical evaluation; summarizing paragraph units; summarizing extended complex passages; summarizing an argument; note-making, revision
5	Writing	Continuous writing: expository and argumentative; continuous writing; letter writing: formal and informal letters; free/creative writing: speech writing for special purposes; technical and scientific writing.

* Table 1: Summary of the scope of the Secondary School Two (SS 2) Language Arts Curriculum

Method Used	Frequency	Percentage
Modified Lecture Method	5	83.3
Grammar-Transition Method	1	16.7
Direct Method	-	-
Eclectic Method	-	-
Total	6	100

* Table 2: Methods teachers adopt in teaching grammar lessons.

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